Gabriela Babnik

A SILENCE FULL OF THE WIND

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Jeanne went to the doctor's on her bicycle. The money she received from Poulet Malassis could have covered a few months' rent, but she decided instead to realize a long-cherished dream. Ever since she had seen her first female cyclist – maybe after that unfortunate supper with Audre – she had wanted a machine that could be powered with the strength of her body. And after laying out a small fortune for the bicycle, it felt as if this was the first, the only, thing that was fully hers. Ultimately, however, it wasn't about ownership; it was about a changed perspective. Mounted on the bicycle she noticed, for example, a man repairing a roof. He was standing on the veranda with his hand up under the eaves. It had rained the day before and water still dripped from the roof tiles. From such a distance, the houses looked like toys and Paris, too, lost a bit of its lustre. Cyclist Jeanne reduced people and their dwellings to copies of dream images. Everything was merely temporary, as if Hausmann, with merely a sweep of his hand, had erased the medieval neighbourhoods and erected in their place fortresses meant to defy thunderstorms. All that remained were the trees – powerful, gigantic, mocking.

As she was locking up her bicycle, Jeanne wondered if it was possible to buy a full-grown oak tree with powerful gnarled branches, but then smoothed her hair and straightened her skirt. She had not counted on having to take it off in front of a stranger. Most of the time that wouldn't be a problem for her, but this was something different. The doctor felt her abdomen with, most probably, his usual coolness while Jeanne covered her bare breasts with her arms. She was not accustomed to not having a sinful body, one that always made her visible and present, but suddenly this same body was nothing but an object of examination by a man who had chosen to open a clinic on the first floor of a corner building with long, narrow corridors. Jeanne had spent a long time persuading her inner self, which at last gave in. After all, it was just a simple doctor's exam, she kept telling herself, and maybe the thing causing her such sharp pain was not worth serious attention.

The doctor's manner towards her was not one of pity and even less of condescension; instead, he recited questions at her: Does she have regular sexual relations? Does she take opium? Is her urine its normal colour or darker than usual? She pretended not to really understand the questions, but then answered them tersely. It made no sense to explain the complexities of her relationship with Charles, or to tell him what an effective a medicine, in all its forms, opium was when every day one had to

struggle with the superficiality of Parisian life, and as for her urine, she had never concerned herself with the richness or paleness of its colour, but only with its effect in the mouth of a former lover. She shut her eyes when the doctor placed the metal instrument against her rib cage; from experience she knew it would be easier to bear that way. Outside, it was raining again, and through her slightly open eyelids Jeanne listened attentively to the sound of raindrops and a possible second penetration: the branches of the oak were knocking against the building's exterior. They should be pruned or the tree should be made to bend towards the street, but obviously the doctor couldn't do everything – attend to his patients and at the same time see to things outside the surgery. He was leaning on Jeanne, a somewhat thin but nevertheless compact human mass that exuded unbelievable power. He was proud of his profession, proud, too, of this supposedly brand new instrument – the stethoscope – which, he explained, had been invented by a Frenchman. Jeanne forgot the man's name as soon as he mentioned it.

When he was done listening to her lungs, the doctor asked her to turn over, struck her back a few times with his hand, again applied the stethoscope, and then attacked her oral cavity, his left hand resting on her lower jaw with just a slight pressure, nothing more, and asked her to stick out her tongue. Finally, he told her to lie down again, face up; he pressed the left side of her abdomen with both hands, and as he started moving lower, millimetre by millimetre, into the right half, Jeanne screamed. The doctor, surprised, even shaken by what they had both discovered, jumped back. 'I do apologize,' he said, adding, after a brief pause, 'You may get dressed now.'

He drew the curtain and returned to his desk.

Jeanne had a bittersweet taste in her mouth, as when it fills with blood and you realize, to your surprise, that this is the taste of gaping emptiness. She tucked her head beneath the flap on the collar of her blouse, for she suspected that what was to follow would shake her resolve, and that the pain was merely a detail, a fleeting poke, that would sooner or later pass.

'Madame Duval, I am afraid you are suffering from an illness that cannot be cured. What I mean is, even if you had come to see us sooner, there would be little we could do to help you.'

She was grateful that the doctor was treating her as if she were worthy of sincere attention. Tuberculosis was, of course, a very widespread disease, responsible for nearly a third of the deaths in Europe. At least that's what the papers were saying. But this man managed not only to personalize the drama Jeanne was experiencing, but also find the right words for it. What was expected of her was to withstand the pressure, and if at the same time she allowed herself a bit of self-pity, that couldn't hurt either. 'Am I going to die?'

The doctor gave her a kind smile. 'We're all going to die some day. In your case, however, I'd say you have no more than a year, maybe less.'

Jeanne felt like she was about to collapse. 'But is there really nothing that can be done?'

‘I can recommend that you try the thermal waters, a holiday in a warmer climate…’

‘I am certainly not going back to Haiti.’

‘By warmer climate, I meant the south of France. I would also recommend a healthy diet, and as little stress as possible.’

With her arms crossed over her breasts, her lips in a grimace, she felt she would never be able to lift her eyes again. Outside, the gloomy, dwindling March day lingered on, and the doctor had just told her she was a hopeless case. ‘Is there nothing at all?’

‘I wish there was… But tuberculosis normally takes its time. People with this illness can live a few years and not feel any pain at all; on the contrary, for some, this is when they start being more aware of the world around them. But…’

The short pause gave Jeanne, in her abandoned riverbed, time to pick herself up off the ground. She clenched her fists.

‘I’m afraid I found a growth in your abdomen.’

‘A growth?’

‘A tumour. In all probability malignant. I don’t believe an operation would help.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s too large; it’s right next to the wall of your abdomen; I can feel it very clearly…’

‘So can I,’ Jeanne said, and stood up with a jerk. Her eyes were fixed on the doctor’s table, its surface gleaming like an old foggy mirror. If she moved her face nearer, she would probably catch her own reflection – tired, on the verge of exhaustion. She had come as far as this and now things were what they were. Her great strides to nowhere had brought her malignant cancer. According to the doctor, it was impossible to say how far it had advanced, but an operation was out of the question.

‘Is there anything else I should know?’

‘You don’t have a lot of time. Do whatever suits you best…’ The doctor stood up. The examination was over, the diagnosis, clear. He went to the door and opened it.

In the doorway, Jeanne turned around – she could not change anything but she could ask one last question. ‘Will my death be painful?’

A shadow crossed the doctor’s face, as if he had come upon an unexpected obstacle in the middle of a field.

‘No, not at all. You will experience blood poisoning and, ultimately, your heart will stop beating.’

‘Like falling asleep?’

‘You might say that.’

Jeanne stepped into the gravel courtyard, where a flock of black birds, washed in the rain, were dancing in the afternoon darkness. She gazed at the glistening birds’ undulating movements. In

a way she felt relieved. Charles had asked her once if she knew where migratory birds went to die. At the time she had answered him with a shy smile, but now things were more or less clear.

snow in the middle of March

For the last few weeks Jeanne had had dreams in which she returned to her parents' house. To save whatever could be saved. Silk cushions, her father's books and mama's gold earrings, batiks, porcelain, and anything else. When she woke up, she had the smell of smoke in her mouth and tears running down her cheeks. She did not know which was more real, the dream or the life she was living. Ruin remained behind her; only her body pressed ahead, but now it, too, had been given a short expiry date. At night, on the streets of Paris, listening to the footsteps of men and women still rushing around on errands, or maybe just hurrying home, she realized that she had nothing to build, nothing to strive for. She could only focus on learning how to watch. Strolling among the fruit stands at the market, she would slit her eyes a little and look at things as if she were seeing them for the first time; as her gaze lingered over the firm, still-green cherries or on a coconut, which concealed only a bit of water within, she noticed with surprise that the feeling she had once had was gone – no longer, how can I make use of this?, but only, I like this. And also, as she watched the young men buying boat tickets in the Paris agencies, she found she no longer desired them; she was content to merely observe how they were showing off.

Now that she was on her own again, she felt no better than when she was with Charles; now, it was clear they had each desired something different – Charles nurtured the desire to be remembered, while Jeanne had wanted only to survive, which, in her view, was the deepest human desire and impossible to vanquish – but everything had changed; she had become nervous and anxious, and even though she sometimes still sang to herself the old songs from La Rêve, her middle pitch carrying a darker timbre, the notes would repeat as if they were strangely hovering in anticipation of silence. Something in her knew she would not be spared. Now there was nothing to cling to any more, least of all the memory of love. From time to time she would still have flashes of kisses in dark streets, when Charles had whispered some silliness in her ear, pressing her against the cold wall and running his hand through her hair – she could feel the mud beneath her feet and Charles's wet tongue in her mouth, but some things, clearly, were irrecoverable. The passion was outside of her. What she and Charles once shared had been real, but it had later evaporated, lost any connection with them. She thought about writing him a letter. 'My dearest Charles, thank you for all those moments, but I must confess that the life we had together wore me out.' No, too boring. 'Dear Charles, there is something

I must tell you: I am dying.' Too sentimental. 'Dear Charles, I miss you.' This missing, although sincere, was too naive.

More and more her eyes, even when she would go on walks, were fixed on the ground, until something like an aversion towards the city grew inside her. It was probably that she had merely had her fill of it. Trips to the countryside, especially when the weather was good, became routine. At first, she would go to the fields and glades on the edge of the city. More and more the recognition was growing that the fissure inside her could no longer be dulled, and that, despite her earlier belief that she had as many lives as a river has tributaries, it was suddenly clear that the fire inside her had burned out. If just a few weeks earlier she still imagined that she was too stubborn to let herself be destroyed, now suddenly she had to face reality. Life, she thought to herself, had defeated her. The awareness that arrived was more than bitter: she had never found a way to rid herself of all forms of obligatory thought and behaviour – there had been her performances at La Rêve and posing in artists' studios, but none of it had helped her invent a means to give form to her wildness.

There were days when she did not even return to Paris, neither to her relatives in Château Rouge nor to the rented hotel room; instead, her outings became longer and longer. When she was unable to walk any further, she'd buy a train ticket, travel for two or three stops, get off at some random location, and then, after a short ramble, spend the night on the edge of a clearing, where half of the following day she'd pick cloudberries until her pockets were full of them. Only then would something in her begin to shine and the person she had once been return to her. The girl who early in the morning had laid the breakfast table, arranged the spoons and the bowls, and believed that things would happen as they had to happen.

From Gare du Nord, where she boarded the train, to the stop where she disembarked, three or four hours needed to pass; leaving the train, she would walk a few miles and try to think of nothing. Since her legs did not carry her as well as she liked, she would usually sit down, right on the ground, lean against a tree, pick up a handful of soil, and start sniffing it. Her body had aged and lost its strength, and the only thing it still wanted was to bend towards the earth; earth was the only thing that could still feed it. She thought about the expression on the doctor's face when she asked if she was going to die. It had been a friendly question, asked in a moment of trust, although it was born of great weariness. She had probably hoped the doctor knew more, and when it turned out that he didn't, she hoped only to experience some insight or something. She did not want to miss this last chance. She gazed into the night, which seemed to have changed into brimming white air. She was convinced that if she stared long enough, then maybe what had once been hidden would become visible. Her people in Haiti believed in such things; worn out from labour in her father's field, they would light a fire as evening approached and tell each other that within the loneliness, the coldness, and the barrenness of the earth, their friend the moon was rising.

She lay down and, for a moment, for only a moment, shut her eyes. It was not just that she had had her fill of Paris, and probably of her own life, too, and needed quiet, but also that she now finally understood what snow was for – that it had to fall every year, for this was the only way to ensure that nature slept.

Jeanne departs for the forest

She did not leave the city until late afternoon.

There was a moment in the compartment when she was completely alone, and the chugging of the train seemed to lend permanence, maybe even motionlessness, to the moment's duration, which, accustomed as she was to speeding her life up, might have plunged her into sadness, only she had sworn to herself that she would not give anyone the satisfaction of seeing her crumble; she desired only to exit everything she had ever known, everything that had been forced on her.

The velvet, floor-length curtains she closed in the hotel room were not her adieu to just one room, but to Paris as a whole. Had Charles, that great lover of ceremony, known of her gesture, he would probably have been proud of her – although he would have been less thrilled by the fact that she got off the train in a little village whose name she did not know. She knew only that she had been travelling south. As she stared through the window of the train at the moveable architecture of the clouds, she remembered the girl from La Rêve who had disappeared. After weeks of searching for her, when everybody thought she had vanished into some invisible abyss, her body was found quartered and mutilated in the south. The police never caught the person who did it, and some time later they said he had moved to a different country. What Jeanne remembered most was the photograph in the newspaper, of a field where there was no trace of the crime, no trace of what had happened. In winter, in the dressing room, the girls would sometimes joke about being cold and wanting to go a bit further south. One of them, in jest of course, had said, but not too far south.

The platform was immersed in fog; she had put on a light overcoat, under which she wore only her full-length apricot dress, washed and dried so often in the greyish sun that one could easily sense the weary body beneath it. She turned around for a moment to look at the train, maybe to glance at the misty window on which from sheer boredom she had written her name, but it had already left. She muttered under her breath that probably nowhere was safe, not here, not in Paris; the only difference was that in the countryside everything had its own specific place; she alone was a foreign body, whose papers had been seized in Paris. As in a nightmare, she had been surrounded in the middle of the city by a pack of gendarmes, who told her to come with them to the station. Fortunately, she had not had any opium on her. When they ordered her to lay out all her personal belongings, and even remove her shoes, it was clear to her that somebody had reported her. Opium was permitted in

small quantities for personal use, but its unregulated sale was a punishable offense. Jeanne knew this but had had no choice. The lump in her belly left her little room for manoeuvring. As she was undoing her shoelaces, one of the gendarmes stuck his hand into her thick hair.

'You call this hair? Seems more like wool to me …'

A second gendarme said in response that it was hair all right, but not as nice as white women's hair. 'And doncha see? It don't fall down; it stands erect. She did it up like that for us, y'know, for us white fellas …'

'I ain't gonna touch some black bitch …'

'But you just did …'

'I mean, you know, that way …'

'I hear they all got great big pussies and once you're inside 'em, you just get lost …'

Jeanne stood there breathing quietly, crushed as she listened to these ruddy-cheeked Frenchmen. She could not say when, exactly, the discussion became so difficult for her. From her hair and vulva the gendarmes moved to commenting on her Negroid features, which they did not find typical.

'C'mon, cut it out,' a third gendarme, a massive moustachioed man, broke into the ever more spirited discussion. There was something kind-hearted about him, but only at first. He asked Jeanne for proof of her permanent residence. She gazed into space; it had been a while since she had belonged to only one place, let alone found a permanent home there. The man with the moustache brought her a glass of water and then for a long time just stared at her. She averted her eyes. There was no point explaining anything, least of all was going through her head at that moment, namely, that the celestial bodies only appeared to be configured in a way that approximated a particular shape, something with meaning.

They released her after six hours of questioning. There were patches of sweat under her arms and her only thought was to find her way clear through the unforeseen traps created by Paris, the city that had devoured all her pureness and all her dreams.

The place she was now walking towards was divided into modest allotments where vegetables were growing. Cabbage and beets in gently rounded rows, turnips burgeoning in front of a planting of beans, which were climbing up the narrow hazel branches. A bed of potatoes opened onto the edge of a wood. Nature was starting to wake up, although the ground was still covered in blackened leaves and you could feel a dampness in the air that gets into the lungs and sends you to your bed. But Jeanne didn't give a damn about any of that – she had come here to give birth to what was in her belly. It had various names; the doctor had called it a tumour, but for Jeanne it was a miscarried child, who would return to the forest, just as in the end everything returns to the forest.

She checked one of the raised vegetable beds with her hands, to be sure it could hold her weight, then she sat down on it. The village, with its tiny military-like houses, was just far enough away to keep its secrets. Jeanne saw a man open a door and stare a long time in her direction, as if trying to determine if he had actually seen a woman crossing the field or if it had only been a mirage, but then he went back into the house, where a yellowish light had long been burning.

Jeanne looked at the sky for a while; she felt she could see the contours of the clouds, which, if she stared at them long enough, were moving right to left and then left to right, probably depending on the wind. In the Caribbean, whenever she desired peace, she would go to the sea and watch the clouds; when the wind came up, it would lift them and make sense of them. There she could tell, as dawn approached, if the sky would again be the sky of day or if it would continue only as night; here, however, all she could do was choose a place to fall asleep in. Her eyes wandered over towards the little village houses, where lights were going out one after the other. The farmer who had been unsettled by the girl in the muddy shoes was now very likely putting his hairy arm around his wife's hip and yelling into the hallway at the cats, perhaps the only ones that smelled the wind, to shut up.

She felt cold and wrapped her arms around her knees. She started singing 'Waiting for That Day' by George Michael. The combination of Black rhythm and bass guitar put her in a better mood; then she stopped and gave herself to the difficult task at hand; she put her faith in continuance: the vegetable beds, clouds and forest, everything would go on existing, nothing would change, not even when she was gone. Nature was different from people, but mainly it didn't remember. Something that has been destroyed will bloom again the following year as if nothing unusual had happened.

She did not know when she fell asleep, and she woke up only when she heard an unusual sound not far away. As if something was calling from the treetops. At first, she was frightened, but then, automatically squinting her eyes, she saw a deer feeding with its coarse tongue on the leaves of the bushes. Its coat was strangely glistening. Jeanne was surprised a few moments, not so much by its being there as by the clarity of what she was seeing, but then something inside her felt grateful for this visit. The stag's appearance, she thought, could not be a bad sign for a new beginning. How long would it last? If she thought about it seriously, nothing dramatic had happened, nothing out of the ordinary. To the place she was going she would take the memory of the black darkness in which she had seen the deer, and gratitude for the fact that it had stopped directly in front of her.

14. Grieving

Despite Charles's best efforts, the writing desk was as crowded as the cemetery in Montmartre. He vacuumed the floor, tossed the clean dishes in the cupboard, and opened the window,

but the desk with its stacks of books and papers proved an obstacle. Every time he wanted to put the laptop on it, he had to push a pile away and a few books always tumbled to the floor; he'd kick at them and swear. Some of their authors he respected, others he despised, but he never discarded a single book.

He stood in front of the window and stretched. The living room was bathed in milky light; only below the window, just above the floor, did darkness still linger. It occurred to him that he should check the post, a task that by some unwritten rule had fallen to Jeanne (her habit of pulling the letters out through the slot in the box had caused a few quarrels), but he could not count on her any more. He had the feeling that she had stopped existing in this world, that she had gone to a different place, where human life had no meaning. Initially, after she was declared missing, he thought she had left him – had left only him. A few colleagues from work emailed their condolences, while random female acquaintances he met on the street would look at him with a sparkle in their eyes that said that, when the time was right, now that he was free again, they would pounce.

He switched on the television and stared a few moments at the face of the woman reading the news. He couldn't decide if she was ugly or merely insipid. Whatever it was, Charles was still unable to accept mundane French reality. Just as two and a half months earlier, when he and Jeanne ran off to the Pacific islands and he was seized by a sense of euphoria, now his body was possessed by dull weariness, which had only one thing in its sights: to be wiped from the face of the earth. When, a day or so after their return, he decided to stay in bed and didn't have enough strength even to make himself tea or eat half a baguette, he told himself this was simply the disgust of someone who has just come back from a long adventure.

He returned to the laptop and checked his mail. Again, he clicked on the junk and trash folders, but there was nothing. All he needed, in fact, was a single sentence: 'I decided to go away because I realized we did not share the same goals.' Or: 'I wish you a beautiful life – I'm sure you'll be better off without me.' But if Charles was honest, he knew Jeanne would never write such sentences. In fact, she was quite taciturn, especially these past few weeks. She would sit on the sofa and read, or simply stare into space as if she was trying to decide on something. When Charles looked at her, she would return his smile, as if wanting to reassure him. He decided to give her time; maybe she just had to think things over, ponder them a while, then she would be the old Jeanne again; he never suspected she would go so far as to get lost in that forest, although in reality he did not know how far she had gone. There was only the fact of her disappearance and his empty mailbox. In the morning, before he got up, he needed a few moments to grasp the situation he now found himself in. Something deep inside was trying to convince him: *I can live with this. I'll come to terms with it over time.* But only moments later he would be looking for comparisons that might best describe himself. Maybe he is like the farmer in the poem who after his field is burned moves into his daughter's home in New

Zealand but then stares out of the window thinking his life is over. No, Charles thought, believing that the earth has defeated you is too pathetic. He preferred to think – no matter how bizarre the image – that his position was more like that of women who have miscarried: they know that life has slipped out of them, but at the same time there is no corpse.

He headed to the bathroom and wondered if he should take a shower. He stank and felt sticky; also, he had that constant, deceptive feeling that Jeanne's smell still clung to his skin. It was on the pillows and in the wardrobe; at times he felt like burning the place down – this love nest where they had spent some eight years together – but then he would have to burn all of his things as well. He tried to console himself that these waves of despair, waves of desperate longing for the woman he still loved, were in fact just wounded pride. If anyone was meant to leave, it should have been him, Charles, who left Jeanne, not the other way round. She should be the one who walked around the room in circles, went back to bed, and then, in a fit of panic that she'd left her phone on the desk, jumped up again. There were no messages on the screen. Or at least none worth his attention. His mother had texted that she had left something for him by the door, but he didn't have the energy to text her back 'tx'. They hadn't seen each other since his return; he thought he should first stop living like a solitary animal – he had reduced his life to only the most necessary contacts. He communicated with students and superiors at the faculty mostly via Zoom. If for some reason he needed to run over to the library, which was practically across the street, or to the grocery for bread and a tin of beans, he would throw on his overcoat, usually wearing just sweatpants and a T-shirt underneath it. The neighbours watched him with pity in their eyes; probably every single one of them was thinking he should see a doctor, but there was no medicine for the things that had happened to him. No matter how long he lay in bed contemplating the agonies suffered by his beloved writers, from Balzac, unshaven, almost black, with cold eyes, mourning his love, to the dying Beethoven, he was not like them; his Jeanne had been different from all other muses recorded by history – if they had anything in common at all, then it wasn't Jeanne herself but the curse of the body, which demands what it wants and can be appeased in one way alone, Charles thought, by an extract of an extract of the divine poppy. He and Jeanne sometimes bought it from a bookseller on Place de Clichy; she would stand there with a book in her hand, laughing at his serious demeanour.

'Whenever you do something that isn't allowed, you get that expression on your face,' Jeanne said; she was holding a carefully twisted roll of papers in her hand as she walked down the paved street. In those days she was devoting a lot of time to her band, working as a proofreader by day but spending long nights at bars, and would come home bone-tired at daybreak reeking of cigarette smoke. Charles would try to get close to her by being solicitous – sometimes in the morning he would cook her a hot dog, slicing its lower part into an octopus; he would sit on the edge of the bed and lovingly try to convince her. Jeanne would sit up a little, kiss him, and ask him to tell her a story,

something pleasant and amusing about the painters he had been studying; Charles hated this, but on such occasions he would renounce his Beethoven-like sternness.

He told himself he was going back to bed for just five minutes, but he woke up in the middle of the afternoon; then he took a shower and went for a walk. He set off towards the east side of town and in front of Notre Dame, when he felt drops on his face, he remembered his dream: in it, he had seen very clearly himself and Jeanne raising a child together. At first, the child was alive, but the next moment they were laying him on a pile of leaves – a small rejected body wrapped in an animal skin. Out of the whole dream, Charles understood only that Jeanne and he had found themselves in the role of mother and father and that this was their highest calling.

When in the evening he rang the bell of his mother's flat, he noticed that his hands were shaking. Caroline Aupick was a rational woman and usually took things as they were, except for anything to do with Jeanne. From the day they first met, Charles knew that the two women would never seek, and never find, a common language. He, Charles, was what their only point of connection, and apart from the fact that they expressed, each in her own way, that were it not for him they would never have known each other, nothing more could be added. Leaning his body forward, he pressed on the bell with his full strength; this, he supposed, was the only way to rid himself of selfness.

excerpt from the novel translated by by Rawley Grau